**Top Historical figures from Ancient History**

1. **Abraham:**  According to tradition, Abraham is the forefather of Jews, Christians, and Muslims. He discovered monotheism and passed the belief on to his descendants. Abraham may be an artificial construct created during King David’s time to justify Israelite rule. However, the story may be even older and possibly based on a real person. After all, someone had to be the first monotheist.
2. **Akhenaten (r. 1353-1334 B.C.):** Akhenaten abandoned Egyptian polytheism and introduced monotheism to the world. He centered his religion on the sun god, Aten. Despite his best efforts, the priests and Egyptian people never accepted monotheism. To do so threatened the natural order. Following his death, Egypt returned to polytheism under Tutankhamen. However, some believe Akhenaton’s efforts influenced a small group to remain monotheistic. These early monotheists eventually became the earliest Jews.
3. **Alaric (370-410):** Alaric wanted peace with Rome. However, shoddy treatment of his people by Roman officials forced his hand. The Visigoth king invaded Italy twice and laid siege to Rome itself three times. On the third try, slaves opened the gates and the Visigoths sacked the city. Alaric died shortly thereafter while trying to extricate his forces from Italy.
4. **Alexander the Great (356-323 B.C.):** Alexander the Great is history’s greatest general. After his father’s assassination, he assumed the Macedonian throne and quickly asserted his authority. In 334 B.C., he invaded Asia Minor to conquer the Persian Empire. He won a number of decisive battles and incorporated the Persian Empire into his Macedonian Empire. After defeating the Persians,
5. **Amenhotep III (r.1391-1353 B.C.):** Amenhotep the Magnificent ruled Egypt during a time of great prosperity. His reign saw Egypt reach the pinnacle of power and influence in the world. Egypt enjoyed unprecedented peace as well. Most importantly, he built the Temple of Karnak and Luxor Temple.
6. **Archimedes (287-212 B.C.):** Archimedes was one of the greatest scientific minds in history. He dabbled in mathematics, physics, engineering, and astronomy. He also created many ingenious machines including a screw pump. There are rumors he created a “death ray” using mirrors to deflect the sun’s rays onto an invading navy.
7. **Aristotle (384-322 B.C.):**  Aristotle studied under Plato and tutored Alexander the Great. He was a universal philosopher tackling subjects ranging from metaphysics, political science, the arts, and the hard sciences. The philosopher created the first comprehensive study of philosophy. His interest in the hard sciences laid the foundation for Western science for over a thousand years.
8. **Ashoka (304-232 B.C.):** Ashoka expanded the Maurya Empire and ruled from Pakistan to Afghanistan and from Bangladesh to Andhra Pradesh. The emperor preferred Buddhism to the overtly class conscious Hinduism. After adopting Buddhism, he attempted to spread the faith across the empire and rejected violence. The new Ashoka ruled peacefully during a prosperous time for India.
9. **Attila the Hun:** Attila ruled the Hun tribes and battled both Eastern and Western Roman Empires. In 450, he began menacing the west. Following a defeat in 451 to Aetius, he invaded Italy proper. The Roman government proved too weak to counter the threat. Pope Leo I negotiated with Attila and bribed the barbarian. Afterward, Attila and his Huns left Italy. The Hun leader died the following year after drowning in his own blood on his wedding night. European Christians viewed this as God’s retribution.
10. **Augustus (63 B.C.-14 A.D.):** Augustus created the Roman Empire. As Julius Caesar’s heir, he eliminated his benefactor’s enemies and then turned on his own partners. After Marcus Lepidus went into retirement, he defeated Mark Antony and Cleopatra in a civil war. After Antony’s death, he assumed the role of “First Citizen” and restored the republic in name only. By this point, Rome had suffered over a century of turmoil and civil war. People wanted peace and stability and Augustus provided it while establishing an empire. His reign ushered in the Pax Romana, or Roman peace, which resulted in two centuries of relative peace.
11. **Cincinnatus (519-430 B.C.):**  Cincinnatus served as Roman dictator during times of great national emergencies. Despite being an aristocrat, he lived a humble existence as a farmer. When Rome needed his help, he left the farm and tended to his duties as a citizen. Once the crises passes, Cincinnatus surrendered his power and returned to the farm. George Washington consciously emulated Cincinnatus by returning to serve as president and retiring to Mount Vernon.
12. **Cleopatra (69-30 B.C.):**  Cleopatra ruled jointly with her father before his death. Afterward, she reigned alongside her brother, but the two split over control of Egypt. Julius Caesar arbitrated in Cleopatra’s favor resulting in civil war. After defeating her brother, Cleopatra ruled alone. However, she reigned under Caesar’s good graces. After his assassination, the pharaoh aligned with Mark Antony. The pair planned to rule the world together, but found themselves challenged by Octavian. In the end, Octavian defeated the couple who committed suicide rather than be paraded through the streets of Rome as a prize.
13. **Confucius, Kongzi, or Master Kung (551-479)** B.C. Today he is known in the West as the middle-aged, heavy-set, vocalizer of fortune-cookie-type platitudes in old black and white movies. Confucius was a reformer, an itinerant adviser, a social philosopher, and the "Ultimate Sage to the [Han dynasty](http://ancienthistory.about.com/od/chinadynasties/g/HanDynasty.htm)" [Nylan and Wilson]. His values became dominant in China after he died, but even in the centuries following his death, he was ridiculed by many.
14. **Constantine the Great (272-337):**  Without Constantine, Christianity does not become a major world religion. On the eve of a major battle, he had a vision that the Christian god would ensure his victory if he converted. Before the Battle of Milvian Bridge in 312, Constantine ordered his troops to paint Christian symbols on their shields. Constantine won the battle and assumed the imperial throne. As Roman Emperor, he ended the persecution of Christians and legalized the religion. He used government policy to make it advantageous to be Christian.
15. **Cyrus the Great (600-530 B.C.):** Cyrus founded the first Persian Empire. He ruled Central Asia and conquered much of Southwest Asia. His empire ranged from the Mediterranean Sea to the Indus River. Much of his success can be ascribed to his tolerance of foreign cultures. Cyrus did not suppress his enemies. Instead, he assimilated them and allowed native cultures to continue. As part of this policy, he freed the Jews in Babylon and allowed them to rebuild the Temple. In response, the Jews considered him a Messiah.
16. **Darius the Great (550-486 B.C.):** Darius overthrew the Persian emperor and claimed power for himself. Almost immediately, he faced rebellions against his coup. He quickly put them down and consolidated power. Darius reorganized, reformed, and expanded the empire. The Persian War began under his reign. However, he died before its conclusion. His son, Xerxes, lost to the west and oversaw the decline of the Persian Empire.
17. **Hammurabi (r. 1792-1750 B.C.):**  The sixth king of Babylon put forth a set of laws based on fairness. The Code of Hammurabi espoused “an eye for an eye” justice and provided some rights to women. The law was put in stone for all to see. This innovation undercut the power of the upper classes that could no longer make up law as it suited them.
18. **Hannibal (247-182 B.C.):**  Hannibal hated Rome and launched the Second Punic War. He invaded Italy proper through the alps and defeated legion after legion. In the early years of the invasion, Hannibal won dramatic victories at Trebia, Trasimene, and Cannae. His ranks swelled, but he could not defeat Rome itself. The republic refused to submit and the war dragged on until Scipio Africanus finally defeated Hannibal at Zama. Hannibal survived the battle and went into exile. The Romans hunted him for 20 years before catching up with him. Hannibal committed suicide rather than submit to Rome. His battle victories led to a reputation as one of history’s greatest generals.
19. **Hatshepsut (1508-1458 B.C.):**  Hatshepsut ruled for 22 years, which was longer than any other female pharaoh. She is considered an extremely successful leader. Interestingly, her likeness is depicted in the masculine. This is probably due to Egyptian sexism. During her reign, she extended trade networks, funded expeditions, and was one of Egypt’s most prolific builders.
20. **Hippocrates (460-370 B.C.):** Hippocrates is the “father of Western medicine.” He established medicine as a discipline separate philosophy and other fields. In particular, he accumulated medical knowledge and established clinical medicine in which doctors diagnose and treat patients. The Hippocratic Oath is a nod to the Greek physician.
21. **Homer**: No ancient writer has had a greater impact than Homer. The epic poet recorded the west’s greatest mythical stories in *The Odyssey* and *The Illiad*. These works have exerted an enormous influence on the west. Additionally, they might have been based on actual events. In the late 19th century, archaeologists discovered Troy validating the stories.
22. **Jesus of Nazareth (6 B.C.-30 A.D.):**  During his lifetime, Jesus exerted little influence. He served as an itinerant Rabbi and developed the reputation as a healer. The teacher welcomed society’s outsiders into his movement leading to conflict with the Temple. After Jesus began playing the role of Messiah, they worried that he might be building an army of undesirables. The Romans took note of the Messiah role, which first century Jews believed to be a military leader. Fearing a potential Spartacus, they crucified Christ.
23. **Julius Caesar (100-44 B.C.):**  Julius Caesar attempted to end Roman discord. The republic suffered a series of crises dating to the late 2nd century B.C. By 49 B.C., Caesar garnered extreme popularity and a battle-hardened army. The Senate turned on him forcing the general to either submit or march on the capital. Since submission meant death, Caesar initiated a civil war. Caesar won the civil war, established peace in Egypt thereby securing Rome’s food supply, and engaged in many reforms designed to help the lower classes. The Senate voted him dictator for life leading many to question Caesar’s true motives. Although he loved power, the dictator also hoped to stabilize Rome. Unlike Augustus, Caesar pardoned his enemies. This mistake led to his assassination in 44 B.C.
24. **King David (1040-970 B.C.):** King David conquered Jerusalem and established his capital at the site. Afterward, he waged war on surrounding hostile tribes. His exploits remain important to the three great religions. As the King of Israel, he validates modern Israel’s claim to the Holy Land. In recent years, archaeological evidence has seemingly confirmed David’s historicity.
25. **Mark Antony (83-30 B.C.):**  Antony served as Julius Caesar’s chief lieutenant. He fought alongside Caesar in Gaul and later administered Rome while the Triumvir was in Egypt. After the assassination, Antony united with Octavian to defeat Brutus and the other assassins. Once Brutus was eliminated, the two turned on one another. Antony formed an ill-fated alliance with Cleopatra against Octavian. In the end, Antony committed honorable suicide following his defeat.
26. **Mencius (372-289 B.C.):**Next to Confucius, Mencius is the most famous Chinese philosopher. He served as one of the principal Confucian interpreters advocating various reforms. The philosopher worked as a government official until he decided to retire. Mencius believed he failed because the government refused to initiate his reforms.
27. **Ming of Han (28-75):** Han China’s second emperor introduced Buddhism to his realm. One night, he had a dream of a golden man and believed it represented Buddha. Therefore, he sent a delegation to India to investigate Buddhism and report to him. In addition to introducing Buddhism to China, he expanded the empire’s borders and proved an able administrator.
28. **Mohammed of Mecca (571-632)** CEIt’s hard to underestimate the impact this middle-aged merchant turned mystic turned religious leader turned military commander has had on history and the role he continues to play in the lives of nearly a billion people around the planet. Considered by one sixth of the world’s population to have been the last and greatest of all the prophets, he is best remembered as the man who penned the Koran, one of the best known and most widely read sacred writings in the world.
29. **Nebuchadnezzar II (634-562 B.C.):** The Babylonian king conquered Jerusalem sending the Jews into exile. His failed invasion of Egypt created the conflict with Judah. He torched Jerusalem and leveled the Temple. Despite the penchant for warfare, Nebuchadnezzar created the Hanging Gardens of Babylon around 600 B.C. A series of earthquakes destroyed the gardens around five centuries later.
30. **Nefertiti (1370-1330 B.C.):** Nefertiti supported and may have influenced her husband’s efforts to stamp out polytheism in Egypt. Like Akhenaton, she supported the sun disc god Aten. Following her husband’s death, Nefertiti may have ruled for a time in her own right. She enjoyed unprecedented power and influence for an Egyptian queen of the time.
31. **Paul of Tarsus (5-67):** Paul persecuted Christians as heretics. While traveling to Damascus, he had a vision that many believe was actually an epileptic seizure. In this dream-like state, Jesus wondered why Paul persecuted him and ordered his tormentor to preach his gospel. Paul converted and began his own ministry. Paul enjoyed many advantages over most Christians. In particular, he enjoyed great wealth, Roman citizenship, and had many influential contacts. As a result, he could travel the empire unopposed and broadcast his message much easier than his contemporaries.
32. **Pericles (495-429 B.C.):**  Pericles was an influential Athenian citizen. The era he lived in is known as “The Age of Pericles.” The period witnessed Athens’ rise as a Greek power and the transformation, at Pericles behest, of the Delian League into the Athenian Empire. He raided the league’s treasury and beautified Athens. Eventually, his actions resulted in conflict with Sparta. At the outset of the Peloponnesian War, Pericles delivered a funeral oration, which deeply influenced western society. He died of the plague in 429 B.C.
33. **Philip of Macedon (382-336 B.C.):** Alexander the Great’s father established the battle hardened army and tactics his son later used to conquer the world. Philip enjoyed military success at an early age creating an empire. The Macedonian Empire filled the void left by the collapse of Sparta and Athens in the aftermath of the Peloponnesian War. As Alexander reached adulthood, Philip impregnated another woman leading to some questions as to succession. Rumors persist that Alexander’s mother, Olympia, assassinated him to save her son and his throne. Whether she was behind the murder or not, Philip’s assassination led to Alexander’s ascension.
34. **Plato (424-347 B.C.):**Plato founded the first institution of higher learning in the west. The Academy in Athens helped train young aristocratic minds. Additionally, he helped found western science and philosophy along with his mentor, Socrates. Plato wrote dialogues, often with Socrates as a character, to espouse his views on ethics, philosophy, political science, rhetoric, metaphysics, and so on. *The Republic* is his most important and influential work. In the book, he lays out his ideal state, which is ruled by philosopher kings. He rejects Athenian democracy on the grounds that only a few are fit to rule. However, some scholars believe the work was meant as a joke.
35. **Pompey the Great (106-48 B.C.):** Pompey the Great established himself as a great military leader under Sulla and then rested on his laurels. He accumulated great wealth and power before forming an alliance with Crassus and Caesar. Their arrangement collapsed and Pompey became Caesar’s rival leading to civil war. After losing the war, Pompey fled to Egypt where he was beheaded in an effort to curry Caesar’s favor.
36. **Ramses the Great (1303-1213 B.C.):**  Ramses was the greatest Pharaoh in history. He reconquered Canaan and instituted a great building program, including the Ramesseum. Most importantly, he ruled for over 66 years and rewrote history to serve his own legacy. By his death, there were few people alive to contradict Ramses’ version of events. Many Egyptians would never have known another ruler.
37. **Saint Peter (1-67 A.D.):**  The apostle Peter became an early church leader that abandoned his life as a fisherman to follow Jesus. After the crucifixion, he worked as a missionary before moving to Rome. There he became the first pope. Nero executed Peter in the Great Persecution.
38. **Sargon the Great:** The Akkadian emperor conquered the Sumerians and expanding his empire from the Mediterranean Sea to Iran. He might have been the first person to create a multi-ethnic empire. His reign lasted 55 years from 2270 to 2215 B.C. Sargon served as the model for Babylonian and Assyrian kings for centuries. Some believe Sargon is actually the Biblical Nimrod who created the Tower of Babel.
39. **Scipio Africanus (235-183 B.C.):**  Hannibal defeated Roman army after Roman army. The desperate, but determined, Romans turned to Scipio Africanus to save Rome from the Carthaginian general. Scipio decided to attack Carthage itself to draw Hannibal away from Rome. His plan worked and the Roman defeated the Carthaginian at Zama ending the Second Punic War. Scipio’s victory assured Rome’s ascension as a global power.
40. **Shih Huang Ti (259-210 B.C.):** King Shih Huang Ti of Qin battled his contemporaries during the Warring States Period. He emerged victorious and unified China in 221 B.C. His reforms led to 2000 years of imperial rule. Following his victory, Ti reformed the economic and political systems and built a national road system. His dynasty fell in 207 B.C., but Ti’s reforms continued for two millennia.
41. **Siddhartha Gautama (563-483 B.C.):**  Siddhartha Gautama rejected class obsessed Hinduism as too extreme. He was born into a rich family, but felt something was missing in his life. He began to examine extremes and determined that people needed a “Middle Path” to achieve happiness and enlightenment. His teachings became the basis of Buddhism. Gautama's message attracted many followers, whom the Buddha reluctantly agreed to teach.
42. **Socrates (469-399 B.C.):**  Socrates created the Western method of inquiry. This bizarre figure pioneered the method of answering a series of questions in order to achieve truth. The dialectical Socratic Method essentially questioned everything. This remains a hallmark of the west to this day. In the end, Socrates questioned too much and the authorities executed him. The philosopher did not believe in Athenian democracy and trained his students to question authority. One of his students eventually turned on Athens and threatened the city-state’s existence itself.
43. **Solon (638-558 B.C.):**  Solon rose to power as a reformer. He instituted economic, political, and moral reform in Athens. Most of his efforts failed in the short term. However, his actions laid the groundwork for Athenian democracy as he weakened the aristocratic class and built a government and society based on wealth. Since birth no longer pigeonholed people, the principle of equality was born.
44. **Sophocles (497-406 B.C.):**  Sophocles wrote 123 tragedies during his lifetime. Despite writing for 50 years, only seven have survived to modern times. Antigone and Oedipus the King are probably the most famous of his works. Sophocles deeply influenced the development of drama by adding characters and reducing the role of the chorus. Sophocles, along with Aeschylus and Euripides, make up the big three Greek tragedians.
45. **Thales of Miletus (624-546 B.C.):** Thales was one of the Seven Sages of Greece. Aristotle considered him the first true Greek philosopher. What set him apart were his attempts to explain the world without referring to myth or religion. His focus on the observable and rejection of mythology set the basis for the scientific method. Additionally, he was the first to develop hypotheses resulting in his designation as “the father of science.”
46. **Virgil (70-19 B.C.):** Virgil’s poems echo through time. He wrote the *Aenid*, which served as Rome’s national founding myth. It served as a sequel to Homer’s *Odyssey* and *Illiad* and followed Troy’s survivors to Rome. The work helped tie the Roman people to the heroic Trojans and remains relevant today.